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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a passage written by a student and analyzes the way in which each sentence is or is not connected to those before it and after it, revealing the problems that cause the passage to lack coherence. The paper notes that, although this writer would have benefited from an opportunity to talk out her ideas (rather than a lesson in the mechanics of coherence), coherence studies could be the starting point for teacher training. The paper then offers a second draft of the passage, written after the student had discussed her ideas more fully, with a sentence-by-sentence analysis showing that this passage is more coherent than the first. The paper concludes that a schema for the study of coherence could be used for a large-scale study of student writing and that coherence studies are useful not only for teacher training but also for research in the development of writing skill and for longitudinal studies of a student's writing. The paper lists ten works that present various schemata for the study of coherence in writing. (GW)

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A Study in Coherence: Applications for the Teaching of Writing, Teacher Training, and Research

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Over the past two years my colleague at the University of California, Adela Karliner, and I have spent a good deal of time taping one-to-one conferences between student and writing instructor or student and tutor. The purpose of the conference is to discuss the draft of a paper written by the student prior to his writing a second draft. In the course of the best of these conferences--best in terms of the quality of the writing that follows the conference--the students will "digress." The discussion will take a turn away from the paper at hand and toward conversation about the subject matter of the paper. The student writer will explore his ideas further than he had done before and in the process generate thoughts, discover interrelationships, or even change his mind about the emphasis he feels is most important. As a result of his conversation, the second draft he writes reveals a thoughtfulness, a connectedness, and a pulled-together quality that the first draft lacks. This is in spite of the fact that students often do not realize it was the "digression" in their conference that allowed them to do their best work.

The details of how this happened are the subject of an earlier article (College English, January 77). The intent of the present article is to describe our operational definition of "thoughtfulness" and "connectedness." Others have worked toward similar goals. Lee Odell's intellectual strategies, Christensen's paragraph rhetoric,

Pike's tagmemics, and new on-going work done by E.O. Keenan and other linguists of the University of Southern California and M.A.K. Halliday of Sydney, Australia, have all, in various ways, been examinations of the logic and meaning that resides not in syntactic units themselves but in the interrelationships between those units. My work on "mapping" is a similar kind of effort, aimed at teaching students to explore what happens to the meaning of the paragraph when they join sentences in particular ways or in a particular order. Such efforts have provided vocabulary for describing writing that is pulled together and interrelated. The present article is intended to continue this tradition. I call it a study in coherence.

Look at the passage below, a first draft written by Carol on the topic of Edward Albee's The American Dream. It begins with the sentence, "Mrs. Barker, as well as the audience, now understands the situation." As we read the next sentence, we wait for the writer to tell us what it is that Mrs. Barker understands.

> [1]Mrs. Barker, as well as the audience, now understands the situation. [2]Like a cavalry to the rescue, a handsome young man just happens to knock on the door. [3]Grandma tells the young man that there is a job waiting for him here. [4]She then tells Mrs. Barker that she can present this young man to Mommy and Daddy and satisfy them. [5]This way, the young man will have a job, and Mrs. Barker will have satisfied customers,

which is a perfect ending. [6]This is indeed what happens. [7]The audience laughs at this ending because it seems impossible for anything in life to happen that way. [8]At this point, Albee has gotten his point across, that life isn't as simple as that. [9]Through comedies and horrible tragedies, with absurd and impressionistic writing techniques, Albee has indeed made his audience come to the realization that this society of ours does have flaws. [10]He's hoping that this generation will do something about them before they get worse.

Carol (student writer)

As readers, we expected Sentence 2 to explain what Mrs. Barker understands, but it does not. Sentence 2 does not follow in a coherent way. For Sentences 1 and 2 to be coherent, Sentence 2 would need a reference to Mrs. Barker, either implied or stated, and a reference to "understands the situation." "Mrs. Barker" and "understands" are the <u>givens</u> of Sentence 1, to which Sentence 2 must connect.

Let us suppose that Sentence 1 is just a digression, a sort of temporary mistake in coherence, and that retelling the story is what the writer has in mind. In this case Sentences 2, 3, 4, and all that follow are related to each other by conjunctions and references. But there are problems, as we shall see.

The following shows how each sentence is connected to those before it and after it. The underlined words are either conjunctions or they

refer back to words stated or implied in earlier sentences. In either case they have a cohering function.

2 Like a cavalry to the rescue, a handsome young man just happens to knock on the door.

3 Grandma (implied "opens the door") tells the young man (refers back) that there is a job waiting for him (refers back) here (refers back).

4 She (refers back) then (time conjunction) tells Mrs. Barker she (refers back) can present this young man (refers back) to Mommy and Daddy.

5 This way (refers back to "presenting young man to Mommy and Daddy") the young man (refers back) will have a job (refers back) and Mrs. Barker (refers back) will have satisfied customers (refers back to "Mommy and Daddy") which (refers to "having job" and "having customers") is a perfect ending.

6 This is indeed what happens (refers either to "getting job" or "having satisfied customers" or a generalized "satisfaction." If "generalized satisfaction" is intended, is this more than the job and the customers? But if a generalized concept is intended, can it grammatically be the subject of "happen"? Can "satisfaction" happen?

Sentence 6 is in trouble. The problem of meaning here undermines the coherence of the rest of the paragraph. If the reader cannot be sure what this is and thus cannot be sure of what happens, then it becomes more puzzling to read the next sentence.

7 The audience (deictic reference to "play," implied by the context) laughs at this ending (refers back) because it seems impossible for anything in life to happen that way.(refers back).

This ending and that way now have no clear antecedents. It would make little sense to say they refer to "having satisfied customers" or "getting a job" because these do not seem at all "impossible." What is impossible and absurd--in the context of the play--is to be satisfied by these. In Sentence 8 which follows:

8 At this point Albee has gotten his point across, that life isn't as simple as that.

the word that refers back to the same shaky base, the one in Sentence 6. We still are not sure what it is that has happened, or what the ending is, or what is that way. Sentences 9 and 10 below:

9 Through comedies and horrible tragedies, with absurd and impressionistic writing techniques, Albee has indeed made his audience come to the realization that this society of ours does have flaws.

10 He's hoping that this generation will do something about them before they get worse.

have referring words whose antecedents are clear, but these antecedents are back at the beginning of the paper, not in the sentences immediately prior to this one. Hence the reader cannot follow from 8 to 9 and, as we have just seen, cannot really follow after 5 because the antecedents are unclear.

In fact, as we saw earlier, there was no connection by reference between 1 and 2, and it was only by considering Sentence 1 a digression

that we managed to find coherence in the beginning part of the paragraph--a group of reference links and a temporal connective (the word "then") that held it together. As soon as it was necessary to go from temporal connections to relationships of another kind, then the writer was in trouble with coherence. In other words, as soon as it was necessary to describe a general concept such as "satisfaction" or "perfect ending," the writer was having difficulty. It is this sort of trouble that defines "lack of thought" or "problems with thought" for our purposes in doing coherence studies. Perhaps the writer was actually thinking--this cannot be known--but the thinking does not reveal itself in the paragraph she wrote.

There are other ways to describe "lack of thoughtful and interrelated writing" and I do not want to claim that diagramming reference links is necessarily a good way to teach students about coherence. Applied to teaching--supposing, for example, we used such a system for marking student papers--it would be altogether too tedious and time-consuming. Besides it takes only intuition and sensitivity to see that the student writer Carol was not thinking: she hadn't thought about what her general concepts really meant, nor why she disliked Mrs. Barker, nor indeed what feelings or reactions she had to Mrs. Barker, the young man, Grandma, Mommy and Daddy. Who did those characters remind her of? Were they like each other? If the audience would laugh, as she claims, what would they laugh about, and

exactly what words would have gone through their heads as they laughed? And if life wasn't as simple as that, then what was it? How was it more complex? In writing her paper, Carol has grabbed rather desperately at something to say instead of thinking things through for herself. She probably needed not a lesson in the mechanics of coherence--which her native-speaker knowledge of English has given her already--but a time during which she could talk out ideas. Having worked out her thoughts in some detail, she could then write in a way that was naturally coherent. At her level of development Carol needed not a system so much as practice with the language.

It is useful to keep in mind that coherence is a necessary condition for good writing but not a sufficient one. Good writing will always be coherent, but much writing can be perfectly coherent, yet deadly dull, vacuous, pretentious, misleading, or dishonest. This is why I claim that coherence should not form the approach to, or the basis of, the teaching of writing. If used or taught directly, it should be a minor sort of emphasis, used with writers who have already had success in writing and are eager to find ways to conceptualize the process or to find guidelines for future writing. The study of coherence, like the study of grammar, will be of help to those seeking a system or explanation for what is already intuitively within their grasp. For coherence analysis is actually a part of grammar. It is

grammar beyond the sentence level.

While studies of coherence may be only a minor emphasis in the teaching of writing, they could very well be the starting point in teacher training. Looking at why coherence fails in a piece of writing can show more than patterns of coherence. It can show what Carol should have thought about before she wrote, or what Richard really meant to say and managed to obscure by using the wrong connective or some other wrong word, or where Rachel had a good idea and only needed some examples for purposes of clarification. Without a systematic device for looking carefully at student writing, it is too easy to do what we have always done--dismiss a sloppy composition as the best thinking the student was capable of doing, as a grasshopper mind, as an unobservant and insensitive person, as dull, and so on. Perhaps our most important function in teacher training is to demonstrate the difference between a student's actual writing and his potential writing. That is, we need a way to show how a present effort might have been different if the student had only found ways to articulate better the thoughts that he rather badly connected and only half explained.

In Carol's paragraph about The American Dream there was the potential for better writing. Having talked out her ideas more fully, she was able to produce the following second draft.

[1]The lady from the adoption agency, Mrs. Barker, gives them "satisfaction." [2]She presents them with a handsome young man. [3]Because of his beautiful physique Grandma calls him "the American Dream." [4]As he tells Grandma about himself, the audience realizes that though he may be perfect on the outside, he is hollow on the inside. [5]This young man is empty internally because he is the victim of artificial values. [6]Society is structured in such a way that in order to survive, one cannot have any feelings. [7]This man, who could have been a warm, sensitive human being, is instead merely a mass of bones and muscles.

Again a sentence-by-sentence analysis reveals the marks of coherence.

1 The lady from the adoption agency, Mrs. Barker, gives <u>them</u> (refers back) satisfaction.

2 <u>She</u> (refers back) presents <u>them</u> (refers back) with a <u>handsome young man</u> (refers to "satisfaction").

3 <u>Because</u> of <u>his</u> (refers back) <u>beautiful physique</u> (refers back to "satisfaction"--reference reinforced by logical connective "because"), Grandma calls <u>him</u> (refers back) <u>The American Dream</u> (refers to "handsome young man" and also to "satisfaction").

4 <u>As</u> (temporal connective) <u>he</u> (refers back) tells <u>Grandma</u> (refers back) about <u>himself</u> (refers back), <u>the audience</u> (deictic reference to "play") realizes that <u>though</u> (clause subordinator) <u>he</u> (refers back) may be <u>perfect</u> (refers back to "satisfaction" and "Dream") on the outside, <u>he</u>

(refers back) is hollow on the inside.

5 This young man (refers back) is empty (refers back to "hollow") internally (refers back to "inside") because (logical connective) he (refers back) is the victim of artificial values.

6 Society (deictic reference to the group to which all the characters in the play and all readers as well belong) is structured in such a way that in order to survive, one cannot have any feelings (refers back by contrast to "hollow" and "empty").

7 (Result connective implied between 6 and 7) This man (refers back) who could have been a warm and sensitive human being (refers by contrast to "hollow" and refers to "feelings" is instead merely a mass of bones and muscle (refers by contrast to "feelings" and refers to "hollow" and "empty").

The pattern of coherence in Carol's second draft is different from the pattern of the first. Nowhere does coherence break down entirely as it did in the first, nor are there references to unclear antecedents. Not only are there reference links of the kind observed in Paragraph 1, but there are also links made by the conjunctions because, as, and at one point an unstated but clearly implied as a result. As in Paragraph 1, there are temporal links between sentences 2, 3, and 4 (Mrs. Barker gave them a young man, Grandma called him the American Dream, and he told Grandma about himself, and the audience realizes...), but in addition there are other types of linking. The notion "satisfaction" is linked in explanation to the traits "beautiful" and "handsome" and

"perfect." This notion is further explained by contrast with "empty," "hollow," "no feelings," "artificial values," and "mere mass of bones and muscle." Thus Carol is successful in explaining concepts in this paragraph because she was able to link them to traits mentioned in later sentences, traits that describe the concept itself and its opposite. The idea of "the perfect ending" which Carol mentioned ironically in the first paragraph--though it was hard to know she was being ironic--has now been satisfactorally dealt with.

The diagramming technique used in this article to show coherence, has been rough and approximate. It is based mainly on Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion in English though it does not observe all the distinctions and categories of their analysis. It has included semantic notions such as "contrast" that Halliday and Hasan do not use. For other contexts a more schematic representation might be desirable because it would make for more preciseness and would be more easily understood by those working with the model over a period of time. For example, a large-scale study done by a working group could make good use of arrows, charts, columns, and so forth. Such a schema, whatever its form, would show answers to the following questions:

1. What words are linked together by reference? Include pronoun reference, reference by repetition ("the young man...the young man"), and reference that is "deictic." (Trees grow here, especially beeches. Beeches, everyone knows, are trees. Thus the deictic reference of "beeches" to "trees.")

2. What words are linked to each other as object and trait? (We loosely used "refers" to describe this relationship in this article.)

3. What conjunctions occur between syntactic units? What is their meaning? (temporal "then", contrasting "but", conceding "in spite of", additive "and", and so on)

4. What conjunctions are implied but not stated?

Various models can be followed. The bibliography will lead the interested reader to various kinds of schema. But invariably one begins to modify whatever model he is given in the interests of adapting it to his own time limitations, the interests of his audience, and his preference for one kind of schema over another.

What is important is the usefulness of coherence studies as an analytical tool. Teacher training is one area of application. Research in the development of writing skill is another, an area where coherence studies can provide a methodology for collecting data. Admittedly, assessment of student writing can be done more quickly by methods other than coherence analysis--by having a number of teachers score papers on the basis of various traits. But something more analytical is called for if we are interested in the why behind the assessment or the how of development in writing skill.

Studies of coherence will be useful in comparison studies. If we compare the work of a single student over a year or two years, will

we discover a developmental pattern with regard to coherence? Will we find much more problem with coherence--as I suspect we will--when a writer changes from narrative writing to "idea-based" writing? Will coherence studies reveal interesting differences between first and second drafts?

We have for many decades looked at the sentence as the unit of writing which deserves our attention. We have tested it, poked it, and examined it. We have tried to teach it before going on to paragraphs and larger units of writing. In spite of Winston Churchill's assertion that he learned to write by learning about the beauty of the English sentence, and in spite of my own interest in the syntax of sentences, I believe there is more to be gained in insight into student composing problems by looking beyond the level of the sentence. Coherence in itself is interesting, and what its presence or absence shows us about student thinking is even more so.

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